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# Student Perceptions of Responsive Classroom in an Urban Setting

Jeremy Lee Jones  
*Augsburg College*

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# **Student Perceptions of Responsive Classroom in an Urban Setting**

**Jeremy Lee Jones**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education

AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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Lindell Library  
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MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA  
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Final Project** of

Jeremy Lee Jones


has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education degree.

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Committee:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Adviser

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Reader

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## ABSTRACT

### Student Perceptions of Responsive Classroom in an Urban Setting

Jeremy Lee Jones

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Action Research Final Project

Responsive Classroom is an approach to elementary teaching that focuses on the social, emotional, and academic needs of children by creating a warm classroom environment. Responsive Classroom incorporates ten classroom practices into its educational framework. These classroom practices consist of: morning meeting, rule creation, interactive modeling, positive teacher language, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, working with families, and collaborative problem solving. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this study seeks to explore student perceptions of Responsive Classroom based on a specific population of urban students. Themes that emerged from the interviews were: (1) Responsive Classroom establishes a warm classroom community; (2) Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork; (3) Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice; (4) Responsive Classroom provides accountability for actions through logical consequences; and (5) Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

As the clock in Ms. Tanner's sixth-grade classroom reads 9:05 on a Wednesday morning, some of her students are finishing their breakfast while other students are in hot pursuit of their math journal which is hidden inside their messy desks. It is now 9:10 which is the official start of the school day at MM Elementary School located in an urban city within the upper Midwest. While the students finish getting settled in, Ms. Tanner is at her desk clicking away at her laptop, checking any last-minute emails and taking attendance for the day. Once attendance has been accounted for, Ms. Tanner announces to her sixth-grade class that they are to "circle up" in front of the classroom. It is now time for morning meeting which includes a greeting, a share, and a planned activity--all parts of Responsive Classroom (Rimm-Kauffman and Chiu, 2007). Of the 27 sixth-graders who are in Ms. Tanner's class, two students "stand out" the most during morning meeting time.

Pahoua is an Asian girl who is extremely popular and an A student. Pahoua, her two sisters, and both of her parents, who are middle-class, live in the same urban household. Each morning when Ms. Tanner announces that it is time to "circle up," Pahoua always rolls her eyes, sighs with disgust and states, "Why do we have to do this? This is so dumb!" As a result, Ms. Tanner gives her an immediate warning. Pahoua takes her time sitting down as she is always the last one to make the circle complete. As she does finally sit down she is not sitting like the rest of her classmates who are sitting criss-cross. Instead, Pahoua has her legs extended in an obtrusive fashion. Ms. Tanner asks Pahoua to fold her legs inward and she does so reluctantly. As students begin the morning meeting by greeting each other with a handshake and eye contact, Pahoua is playing with the rings on her fingers, not knowing that it is almost her turn to greet. As it becomes her time to greet her classmates she does a high-five instead of a handshake and

does so laughing hysterically which causes a disruption to the classroom community and gets her sent to the principal's office.

Across the circle sits DeAndre. DeAndre is an African-American boy who does very well academically and is also popular amongst his peers. DeAndre, his two brothers, and both of his parents, who are middle-class, live in the same urban household. Each morning when Ms. Tanner announces that it is time to "circle up," DeAndre instantly gets a smile that could light up a room from Saint Paul to Bangor, Maine. This is DeAndre's favorite part of the school day as he is always the first one on the floor to start the circle which brings excitement to his classmates and a smile to Ms. Tanner's face. As the sixth-graders complete the circle in front of the classroom, Ms. Tanner asks the class "Who would like to start today's greeting?" Without any hesitation, DeAndre raises his hand and states, "I will, I will; can I go first Ms. Tanner?" Before Ms. Tanner can agree to his request, DeAndre has already turned toward the student sitting next to him and greeted him with a firm handshake, an exuberant smile and an appropriate level of eye contact.

As mentioned earlier, both Pahoua and DeAndre do very well academically. They are both popular in the classroom and throughout the entire school, and both of these students have families that possess the same socioeconomic status within their urban communities. Other than their gender, their ethnicity, and their individual interests, they are quite similar. Pahou and DeAndre are also similar in the classroom as Ms. Tanner considers them both to be social leaders and superior learners. The only difference between these two sixth-graders as it relates to the educational setting is their perceptions of Responsive Classroom.

Responsive Classroom is an educational approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe classroom community. One of the

basic beliefs of Responsive Classroom is that it is important for teachers to know their students individually, culturally, and developmentally. In order for children to be successful academically and socially there is a specific set of social skills that are deemed significant within Responsive Classroom. Among these skills are: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.

This research will examine student perceptions of Responsive Classroom and how students within an urban setting perceive this educational approach to elementary teaching. This examination will take place through the utilization of in-depth interviews.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This review of literature will examine research that has been conducted from 1988 to 2010. This time period covers the brunt of the research sensitive to the principle of Responsive Classroom in relation to diverse populations and issues surrounding classroom management. Specifically, an examination of research will focus on a brief history of classroom management, culturally Responsive Classroom management and teacher implementation, student perceptions of teacher caring, dynamics of positive discipline, and the effectiveness of Responsive Classroom. In addition, a summary of the research will be highlighted as well.

### **Brief History of Classroom Management**

According to Monroe (2006), it was found that for many years the understanding of effective classroom management was based solely on behavioral theories of teaching and learning. The behavioral model emphasizes in particular, the immediate consequences of behavior for its role in the subsequent occurrence or lack of occurrence of behavior. This author continued to explain that classroom management strategies drawn from this influence generally emphasize the role of the teacher (or other significant individuals) in the provision of consequences to particular behaviors. Control is sought by the careful manipulation of consequences. As a result, these behavioral models promote dependence on rewards and penalties. Over the past decade, there has been a push to extend beyond these behavioral-control approaches in which yelling, screaming, and embarrassing students along with assigning detentions, suspensions, and even expulsions from school fast track students to self-destruction.

As stated by Brophy (1999), there has been a push to incorporate approaches that focus on relationships and the development of a caring community. These approaches involve teachers and students working in collaboration to determine why the student misbehaved and to also



determine a set of behavioral goals for the student to achieve. Advocates of these community-based approaches such as the Just Community and the Child Development Project contended that building a caring classroom community and establishing strong interpersonal relationships can make the difference between a functional and dysfunctional classroom (Brophy, 1999).

According to Oser, Althof, and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2008), the Just Community is a strong democratic education intervention. In Just Community school meetings, students, teachers, staff members and principals congregate regularly to thoroughly discuss and democratically decide upon issues relevant to life in school. During these times, special community projects are planned, conflict solutions are generated and rules and policies are established that reflect shared norms and values of the school community. The essence of this approach to social and moral learning and to school reform is participation. As these authors continued to state, students are invited to engage in ongoing reflections about the fairness of certain behaviour and of rules and policies and why their community needs a set of rules, thus developing their social-emotional and moral reasoning competence and their sense of responsibility and care for one another.

Sanger and Osguthorpe (2009) indicated that the Child Development Project (CDP) is a comprehensive longitudinal intervention project that was designed to enhance the social and moral development of children through systemic changes in the classroom, school, and home environments. As indicated by these authors, the CDP involves the empirical study, theorizing and practice of moral education in schools. The fundamental theoretical assumption of the CDP is that children have a biologically-based need for belonging, competence and autonomy. Since children naturally have a need for belonging, autonomy and competence, the CDP speculates the

further psychological assumption that satisfying these needs contributes to the formation of a bond between children and the people and institutions satisfying their needs.

In terms of behavior models focused on classroom management in urban settings, it is important to note Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). According to Sugai and Horner (2002), PBIS is a preventative measure that allows children to receive much-needed intervention before a crisis state is attained. PBIS is a three-tiered logical model that delivers behavioral support to all students. The first tier, considered primary prevention, provides universal school-wide interventions such as teaching expectations, providing incentives, and utilizing evidence-based classroom management strategies. The second tier focuses on selected students with standard interventions (i.e., social skills, anger management groups), and the third tier provides intensive, individualized interventions to high-risk students. Using PBIS within an educational framework can be an effective means for determining early intervention and accountability regarding classroom management.

In research conducted by Ullucci (2009) it was stated that classroom management in urban schools is quite often a concept of mythical ideology. Classroom management, in this regard, is defined as the managerial behaviors related to the maintenance of on-task student behaviors and the reduction of off-task or disruptive behaviors. The sensationalism of media outlets portrays students from an urban setting as needing hard-handed discipline, prison-like policies, and a high-level of structure to remain on the straight and narrow. The legacies of concentrated poverty, neighborhood violence, student despair and discouragement along with family instability that permeate many urban communities contribute to the difficulties and challenges for effective teaching and student management.

Ullucci (2009) continued to suggest that, although urban students may have acquired the skills deemed necessary for acceptance and survival in their communities, these skills are a direct response to the intractable social hardships and conditions many of these students face each day. These skills also conflict with those needed for creating a learning community that values and nurtures the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of the students. While a well-managed, well-disciplined or “controlled” classroom is necessary for all children, students in urban schools do not require elaborate reward and punishment schemes nor do they require progressively more severe discipline policies and institutional-like settings in order to succeed in the classroom. Instead, these students need a warm, positive, community-based approach to education that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth (Ullucci, 2009).

#### Culturally Responsive Classroom Management and Teacher Implementation

According to Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004), “The literature on classroom management has paid scant attention to issues of cultural diversity and the literature on diversity has focused limited attention to classroom management” (p. 26). In terms of culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2000) defined this form of teaching as:

Using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming (p. 29).

Milner (2006a, 2008) stated that the type of learning environment in which they teach serve as a critical area of concern for teachers. Milner continued to explain that teacher concerns about classroom management are sometimes exacerbated in urban settings, where students’

languages, experiences, ethnicities, religions, and abilities may be highly diverse and may or may not be shared by the teacher.

Building from the literature on culturally responsive teaching, Weinstein et al. (2004) conceptualized several principles that shape culturally responsive classroom management: (a) recognition of teachers' own ethnocentrism; (b) knowledge of students' cultures; (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political systems in education; (d) appropriate management strategies; and (e) development of caring classrooms. These authors also stated that developing and implementing culturally responsive classroom management is a frame of mind more than a set of predetermined skills, actions, ideas, or strategies.

To extend this thought, Weinstein et al. (2004) also explained that it is through the responsive nature of teachers that strategies can be developed and implemented that allow teachers to manage and facilitate classroom learning opportunities and reject attempts to control students. Among other effective classroom management strategies and approaches in urban and diverse classrooms, Milner (2006a, 2008) stressed the importance of establishing expectations for student behavior, communicating with students in "culturally consistent ways," creating inclusive and caring classrooms, and working with families to build strong partnerships and relationships.

In regard to classroom management and teachers, Delpit (1995) focused much attention on referral patterns, particularly on patterns of those students from diverse backgrounds. These findings suggested that most disciplinary referrals originate in the classroom and more often than not, the referrals are from students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. One can connect the referral patterns to Noguera's (2003) impressions of disciplinary practices in schools and prisons. As Noguera declared:

Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society. Typically, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students...the assumption is that safety and order can be achieved by removing “bad” individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be “good” and law abiding. Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society (p. 342-343).

The literature from Delpit (1995) also suggested that there are some inconsistencies between the rules or the culture of power and some students’ ways of knowing and conducting themselves. Delpit continued to state that consequences of disciplinary referrals and the inconsistencies between teacher/school expectations and student behavior are reduced access and opportunity to learn. With this the case, there is an allowance for students’ academic performances to suffer when they are not in the classroom.

According to Pasteur and Toldson (2002), an understanding of cultural differences is essential for promoting students’ school success. These authors continued to explain that the more educators understand the cultural backgrounds and styles of minority groups, the more minority students will achieve. In this case, minority groups are defined as groups that are insufficiently or inadequately represented. It was also expressed by these two authors that cultural differences occur along at least four dimensions: communication style, social interaction style, response style, and linguistic style.

Pasteur and Toldson (2002) also noted that African-Americans have an expressive or verbal presentation style called frankness of manner. With looks, gestures, signals, body

language, and tones, African-American children engage in telling the truth or telling it like it is. African-Americans associate this style with being honest, forthright, blunt, and direct; whereas, Caucasian teachers may receive it as abrasive, confrontational, or disrespectful (Pasteur & Toldson, 2002).

In a study of 11, 001 students in 19 elementary schools in a large, urban, Midwestern public school, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) analyzed disciplinary records during the 2004-2005 school year. Skiba et al. reported a “differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African-American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation” (p. 317). The Skiba et al. study pointed out that students of color, and particularly African-American students, overwhelmingly received harsher punishments for misbehavior than did their Caucasian counterparts. Skiba et al. (2002) asserted:

Fear may...contribute to over-referral. Teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent African-American males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority, especially if their anxiety is paired with a misunderstanding of cultural norms of social interaction (p. 336).

Literature from Milner (2006a, 2008)) suggested that conflicts of management that surface in the classroom are shaped by the socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and ethnic inconsistencies that exist between teachers and students. This author continued to state that demographic inconsistencies between teachers and students should not be used as an excuse for ineffective or inequitable classroom management policies, decisions, and practices. Instead, Milner explained that when teachers possess the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, and

skills necessary to meet the needs of and be responsive to their students, equitable classroom management and learning opportunities for all students are possible.

In an ethnographic study of 31 culturally diverse students identified by the school as potential dropouts, Schlosser (2002) discovered that teachers must avoid distancing themselves from their students by developing knowledge about the students' home lives and cultural backgrounds and by developing knowledge about adolescents' developmental needs. According to Schlosser, "the behaviors of marginal students are purposive acts...their behaviors are constructed on the basis of their interpretation of school life...relationships with teachers are a key factor" (p. 317). Moreover, as Noguera (2003) stated:

Students who get into trouble frequently are typically no passive victims; many of them understand that the consequences for violating school rules can be severe, particularly as they grow older. However, as they internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms (p. 343).

Based on research conducted by Johnson (2002), teachers often exhibit less than appropriate techniques when working with culturally diverse students in urban and diverse classrooms because they are not aware of their implicit pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and management decisions. This author continued to state that as many teachers adopt colorblind ideologies in their work with students, pretending not to "see" or recognize color, these teachers are missing important features and dimensions of students' identity. As a result, teachers are attempting to manage fragmented, disconnected, and incomplete students. Teachers who adopt color-blind ideologies may fail to recognize ignored discriminatory institutional practices toward students of color such as higher suspension rates for African-American males (Johnson, 2002).

According to Katz (1999), institutional and systemic barriers can make it difficult for teachers to demonstrate their care for and to connect with students. Katz also noted that teachers are sometimes pressured and closely monitored by their administrators to follow a set frame of referral, discipline, and management, which can make it difficult for teachers to employ culturally responsive classroom management.

In one study, Ennis (1996) examined issues of confrontation and classroom management of 10 urban elementary schools that enrolled approximately 110, 000 students from lower to middle-class families. This author's findings revealed that 50 percent of the teachers in the study reported that they did not teach certain content topics "because of the confrontations that such topics generate with specific students" (p. 145).

Furthermore, the study also concluded that because teachers did not want to feel "ganged up on" in their classrooms, students were denied access to certain aspects of the curriculum. The teachers in the study avoided teaching content that "they believed students were disinterested in learning...students refused to learn or to participate in learning, or...[curriculum that] generated discussions that teachers felt unprepared to moderate" (p. 146). According to Ladson-Billings (2002), the teachers in the study were, in a sense, granting students permission to fail mainly because the teachers did not possess the knowledge, skills, and ability to acquire skills to manage their classrooms in meaningful and responsive ways.

Noguera (2003) stated that regardless of the systemic and institutionalized nature of teachers' work in urban and diverse schools, optimal learning can occur without students seated in silence. Teachers, in turn, in their attempts to meet institutional expectations develop and implement management strategies that reify systems of oppression and voicelessness among



students. Students, in turn, resist these systemic parameters, and chaos, disconnections, and mismanagement result (Noguera, 2003).

### Student Perceptions of Teacher Caring

Osterman (2000) explained that the shift toward approaches focusing on caring relationships and community is consistent with the research on students' perceptions of "good teachers." This author stated that over the years, research has affirmed that students who perceive their teachers as "good" teachers are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior, adhere to classroom rules and expectations, and engage in academic activities. According to Woolfolk-Hoy and Weinstein (2006), three factors are central to students' perceptions of a "good" teacher. These factors include the ability to exercise authority without being overly rigid; the ability to make learning fun; and most importantly, the ability to establish positive, caring interpersonal relationships.

Woolfolk-Hoy and Weinstein (2006) continued to state that Caucasian students and high-achieving students identify different aspects of caring than African-American students and low-achieving students. Caucasian, mainstreamed and high-achieving students frequently cite aspects of academic caring, whereas African-American and low-achieving students cite aspects of personal caring. In a study of 100 elementary students, Bosworth (1995) found that, among students of color, the most frequently cited perception of a teacher's care was the teacher's willingness to help with personal problems and to provide guidance. In contrast, the most frequently cited perception of a teacher's care among Caucasian students was to provide help with schoolwork. As stated by Grossman (2005):

Teachers praise African-American students less and criticize them more than European American students. The praise they give them is more likely to be routine, rather than

feedback for a particular achievement or behavior. And when teachers praise them for specific behavior, it is more likely to be qualified (“Your work is almost good enough to be put on the board”) or, in the case of females, more likely to be for good behavior than for academic work (p. 142).

### Dynamics of Positive Discipline

According to Blum (2005), positive discipline has long been an essential dimension of school connectedness. To support this thought, results from an extensive review of research on factors essential to success in school emphasized the power of “school connectedness.” Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.

Purkey and Strahan (2002) defined the goal of positive discipline as “to invite students to see themselves as capable of tackling tough challenges, overcoming obstacles, accomplishing great things, and behave accordingly” (p. 4). These authors also documented three powerful features of successful classrooms. These features include: successful classroom management promotes self-discipline; successful classroom management begins with Academic Learning Time; and successful classroom management promotes academic achievement. With the control theory in mind, Jones and Jones (2001) summarized a recurring set of practices that engage students in addressing their disruptive behaviors in ways that promote self-discipline. These authors continued to state that by asking students to reflect on their decisions, plan and carry out corrections, make commitments, and discuss what they have learned, teachers simultaneously hold students accountable and reinforce positive relationships.

According to Marshall (2005), discipline is the responsibility of the student. Marshall continued to state that when teachers take on the role of disciplining students, they deprive young people of the opportunity to become more responsible. As stated by this author, the usual approach in which the adult imposes some form of punishment is not effective, whereas a far more effective approach is for students to develop procedures to help redirect irresponsible impulses. This literature also stated that when adults impose punishments, students have no ownership in the decisions, take on a victimhood mentality, and have negative feelings toward the imposers. Since the use of coercion engenders negative feelings, such external approaches are counterproductive to good relationships and are effective only temporarily (Marshall, 2005).

Research continued by Marshall (2005) stated that there are three principles that enhance classroom management and promote responsible behavior. The first principle as stated by Marshall is to be positive. People do better when they feel better, and that which people perceive affects the way they feel. Effective teachers communicate in a way that promotes what is desired rather than what is not desired. In being proactive by presenting expectations that are positive, appropriate behavior is more likely to occur. The second principle that enhances classroom management and promotes responsible behavior is that of choice. Marshall stated that choice empowers and that it is best to offer choices in any situation or activity. This author explained that because people do not argue with their own choices, this approach produces ownership while, at the same time, reducing resistance. In addition, Marshall also stated that many behavioral problems erupt when the student perceives—especially amongst peers—that no options exist. Lack of options for these students often prompts feelings that lead to resistance and even defiance. Having options limits these negative feelings that coercion promotes. The last principle that Marshall noted to be of importance in terms of enhancing classroom

management and promoting responsible behavior is reflection. To extend this thought, Marshall stated that superior teachers understand the differences between controlling someone else and attempting to change someone else. Furthermore, the literature stated that people change themselves, and the least effective approach in stimulating personal change is through the use of coercion through imposed punishments or manipulation by bribery (Marshall, 2005).

### Effectiveness of Responsive Classroom

Responsive Classroom is an educational approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe classroom community (Woolfolk & Weinstein, 2006). Responsive Classroom consists of seven basic principles which include:

- The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn.
- The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- There is a specific set of social skills that children need in order to be successful academically and socially.
- Knowing the children we teach individually, culturally, and developmentally is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- Knowing the parents of the children we teach is important to knowing the children.
- How the adults at school work together to accomplish their mission is as important as individual competence.

In association with these principles, Responsive Classroom incorporates ten classroom practices into its educational framework. These classroom practices consist of: morning meeting, rule creation, interactive modeling, positive teacher language, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, working with families, and collaborative problem solving (Woolfolk & Weinstein, 2006).

An exploratory study conducted by Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) over a two-year period examined the contribution of the Responsive Classroom approach. Participants of the study included 62 teachers and 157 children and six schools. Findings of this study concluded that teachers' use of Responsive Classroom practices was associated with students' improved reading achievement, greater closeness between teachers and children, better pro-social skills, more assertiveness, and less fearfulness, even after controlling for family risk and children's previous years' performance (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007).

According to Cothran, Kulinna, and Garrahy (2003), the principles of the Responsive Classroom approach are congruent with the theoretical perspectives of the Bioecological Model as well as the General Systems Theory. With the Bioecological Model, proximal process refers to children's regular, reciprocal, and increasingly complex interactions with people or objects in their own environment. These proximal processes, in turn, contribute to children's growth and thus, children's development can be viewed as a process that occurs in interaction with many dimensions of the child's environment, not only a process that occurs within the child.

Cothran et al. (2003) continued to explain that within the General Systems Theory, teachers' relationships with children are critical to their development. These relationships are vehicles or mechanisms for addressing the multifaceted needs that children have when they come to school—the need for recognition, safety, acceptance, as well as skill and academic development. In addition, teachers play a regulatory role in their interactions with children. Teachers regulate the behavior of children in their classrooms through their relationships with children (e.g., teachers become role models and children behave in ways that are consistent with what is expected of them); the implicit and explicit structures they create in the classroom (e.g., classroom rules and procedures); and their disciplinary strategies (e.g., time out).

The Responsive Classroom approach acknowledges the important role that teachers' social interactions and children's daily school experiences play as mechanisms for enhancing development, consistent with the definition of proximal process which is the basic unit of development. In addition, the authors of this research continued to state that the Responsive Classroom approach acknowledges the importance of relationships in children's school experience and has specific principles (e.g., social learning is as important as academic learning) and practices (e.g., a daily community-building morning meeting) designed to create implicit structures in the classroom that regulate children's behavior and promote positive relationships. Thus, the Responsive Classroom approach is conceptually aligned with these two developmental theories previously discussed (Cothran et al, 2003).

Based on McLoyd's research (1998), it was stated that children raised in poor families are more likely to have health problems, show delays in their intellectual development, and develop emotional and behavioral problems. In addition, McLoyd also stated that children living in poverty are less likely to have access to social and academic resources that promote academic development or mitigate stress. This author found that there is evidence indicating that low income families provide early home environments that are not as effective in stimulating intellectual and social development, even controlling for parent education, family structure, ethnicity, and number of children.

According to Dawson (1991) and Zill (1996b), children raised with a single parent are more likely than those living with both biological parents to show school behavior problems. Children whose mothers have limited education are less likely to be able to provide their preschool-aged children with responsive parenting and adequate medical care, contributing to problems upon school entry. In addition, research by Denton and West (2002) stated that

children from families with more risk factors pay attention less well and persist less well in completing tasks--skills that are critical for school success.

Based on these findings, Elliott (2003) indicated that there is reason to believe that the Responsive Classroom approach may compensate for some aspects of disadvantage or be equally effective for children experiencing environmental adversity or not. As stated by Coleman (1988), children from homes lacking in economic resources are more likely to experience a lack of social resources, and they come to school not only needing access and training in academic skills but also having social and emotional needs that are specifically addressed in the principles and practices of Responsive Classroom. As Pianta (2008) described in relation to interventions akin to the Responsive Classroom approach, "In this way the multidimensional and relational nature of the treatment aligns with the multidimensional and relational nature of the risk it is intended to address" (p. 8).

In a study conducted by Rimm-Kauffman and Sawyer (2004), an examination took place in which experience with a relational approach to education, *Responsive Classroom*, related to teacher's beliefs, attitudes, and teaching was determined. Questionnaires and Q-sort data were collected for a sample of 69 teachers in grades K-3 at six schools in a district with a diverse student body (54 percent ethnic minorities, 35 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). Findings showed that teachers who reported using more Responsive Classroom practices reported greater self-efficacy beliefs and teaching practice priorities that were consistent with those of the Responsive Classroom approach.

As stated by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2000), teachers' self-efficacy beliefs (high internal locus of control and positive attitude towards overcoming difficult situations) have been linked to their classroom behavior and practices and to improved student academic

achievement. These authors continued to state that teachers who feel more efficacious are more likely to support positive student attitudes toward school and toward other children as well as to have students who report a higher sense of self-efficacy. The relation between teachers' self-efficacy and student performance is viewed as bidirectional. Teachers feel more efficacious when their students do well, and students do well when teachers feel more efficacious (Goddard et al, 2000).

According to Nespor (2007), each teacher holds sets of priorities that inform his/her discipline and classroom management style and instructional practices. These priorities are multidetermined, stemming partly from the personal attributes of the teacher as well as from the school culture in which they are contained. However, some practices and strategies are learned in teacher training, some are acquired through on-the-job socialization in schools, and some are learned through interventions such as the Responsive Classroom approach, which is designed to help teachers develop classroom management and instructional skills.

In summary, effective classroom management is an important part of student academic and social success while in the school setting. It is in these classrooms where a strong emphasis is placed on students' individual, cultural, and developmental needs. As student behaviors have evolved over the years into more "severe" realms, so, too, should the discipline that is placed upon them. However, with this in mind, the discipline should not focus on the punishment but more on the accountability of the action that transpired. With schools placing much emphasis on establishing and maintaining diverse classroom communities, much emphasis is focused on school connectedness, in which academic and social curriculum hold equal importance.



## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### *Overview*

The main focus of this study is based on student perceptions of the Responsive Classroom approach in an urban setting. Over the past thirty years, Responsive Classroom has been used in classrooms across the United States to enhance the social, emotional, and academic needs of students by creating a warm classroom community in which these needs are adequately addressed. This study seeks to determine student perceptions of Responsive Classroom within a specific urban population that will take into account the culture and gender of the individuals involved.

The specific form of research that was used in this study was action research. As stated by Mills (2000):

Engagement in action research aims to take action and effect positive educational change in the specific school environment that was studied...with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (p. 5-6).

Action research is a form of qualitative research as it uses journaling, interviews, and participant observation as a means of data collection (Mills, 2000). As stated in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* by Denton and Lincoln (2005):

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (p. 3).

All data gathered for this study was qualitative in nature as in-depth interview transcripts were used. As indicated by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) data refers to the rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis which include materials such as interview transcripts and participant observation field notes.

### *Setting*

This study was conducted at MM Elementary School which is an urban school in the upper Midwest. MM Elementary School provides educational services to grades kindergarten through sixth grade. The overall student population of the school is approximately 335 students with a full-time teacher population of 17 teachers. The ethnicities of the student body are as followed: African-American, 53 percent; Asian-American, 25 percent; Caucasian, 15 percent; Hispanic, 5 percent; and Indian, 2 percent. It is also important to note that 75 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch; 35 percent of students are English Language Learners (ELL) and 17 percent of students receive special education services.

MM Elementary School is classified as a magnet school, one which is public and conducts specialized courses or curricula. MM Elementary School is a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence that integrates the STEM concept of incorporating Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics to extend student educational opportunities. This school has an open-enrollment policy which indicates that any elementary student can attend this school regardless of whether or not he or she lives within the confines of the school district.

### *Participation*

The entire student population of MM Elementary School was not used for this study. Instead, only six students were selected as participants of the study based on a set of criteria.

These criteria included: enrollment as a sixth-grade student at MM Elementary School; a student of African-American, Asian-American, and Caucasian ethnicity; and gender including boys and girls. The participants were recruited verbally through personal contact based on my direct observations and initial discussions with them. Due to the fact that sixth grade is the highest grade level at MM Elementary School, these students have had the most exposure to Responsive Classroom. Therefore, these students provided the most dialogue during the interviews. Data was gathered using in-depth interviews. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), qualitative interviewing is repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words.

### *Procedures*

Interviews with the participants lasted 15 minutes in duration and consisted of open-ended questions that focused on Responsive Classroom and their perceptions of this approach to elementary teaching. To create a comfortable environment for the participants, all of the interviews were conducted in the exhibit hall area which is designated as a "quiet area."

By doing this, distractions were limited allowing for more conversation to evolve. The interviews took place in the exhibit hall during sixth-grade recess over a one-week time period (5 school days). At the onset of each interview I explained to each student what the purpose of the research project was and what the expectations were of them during this time. It was also made clear to the participants that, at the time of the interviews, I was a researcher as opposed to the usual position of assistant teacher.

This was very important to clarify for the participants because it allowed for them to provide more honest responses to the questions that they were being asked. Also, before each

interview transpired, I reminded the participants that they did not have to continue with the interview if they chose not to or if they felt uncomfortable. It was also explained to them that if they chose to discontinue the interview at any time, pre-existing relationships with me, MM Elementary School, and Augsburg College would not be affected.

During the interview process, in which each participant was interviewed one time, a series of questions were asked pertaining to Responsive Classroom. The initial interview questions asked how long the students have been a part of Responsive Classroom and their feelings regarding this approach. From that point, additional questions emerged based on their answers and the follow-up questions, in turn, focused more specifically as to why these particular students had positive or negative perceptions of Responsive Classroom and what changes they would apply to this educational approach. Towards the end of the interview, I allowed for the participants to provide any other responses that had not already been said regarding Responsive Classroom. At the conclusion of each interview I thanked the participants for their cooperation regarding this research study and escorted each participant back to their classroom.

### *Participants*

Each participant chosen represented a different “perspective” in terms of culture and gender. Specifically, a sixth grade boy and a sixth grade girl from the African-American, Asian-American, and Caucasian populations were selected. These populations of students were chosen based on the cultural makeup of the school with these three populations representing the majority. It is important to note that all six students that were selected for this study are from the same classroom, have the same teacher, and experience the same approach to Responsive Classroom. This was done to capture “student perspectives” of Responsive Classroom opposed to the implementation of Responsive Classroom by various teachers. The names of the

participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality. The following is a “snapshot” of each student who participated in the study:

**Quyntel** is twelve years old and he is African-American. He has been at MM Elementary School for five years since second grade. He enjoys playing video games on his PSP or PlayStation 3 with his favorite game being Street Fighter IV. He also enjoys playing hockey, football, and board games; especially Monopoly. Quyntel receives Kofi Services on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Kofi Services is a culturally-specific, school-based mental health program for African-American youth and their families who are experiencing difficulties in school, personal relationships or other areas of their lives. He lives with his mother and 16-year-old sister.

**Taneesha** is eleven years old and she is African-American. She has been at MM Elementary School for three years since the middle of fourth grade. Prior to MM Elementary School, Taneesha attended two other schools both in Chicago, IL. She enjoys reading interesting books, watching scary movies, and playing basketball on the weekends with her cousins. Taneesha has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which affects her ability to focus in class for long periods of time. She lives with her mother, stepfather, brother, and two sisters. Her two sisters attend MM Elementary School and they are in kindergarten and third grade.

**Xiong** is eleven years old and he is Asian-American. He has been at MM Elementary School for seven years since kindergarten. Xiong enjoys playing tag with his younger brothers, kickball with his cousins, and Monopoly. Xiong also likes to play video games on his PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii, or Xbox 360. During recess and lunch time, he likes to play Bakugan Cards and Bakugan Battle with his friends. Xiong likes to watch anime on television as

well as draw anime characters from Dragon Ball Z. Xiong receives special education services for a learning disability in math and reading. He lives with his mother, father, and two brothers.

**BauPha** is eleven years old and she is Asian-American. She has been at MM Elementary School for seven years since kindergarten. In her free time, BauPha enjoys playing video games on her PlayStation 3 and iPod Touch. She also likes to type stories of fiction and non-fiction, read fantasy books, and take pictures of the outdoors with her digital camera. In addition, BauPha likes to skateboard at the local skate park and swim during the summer. She has been receiving gifted and talented services for four years and lives with her mother, father, and two sisters.

**David** is twelve years old and he is Caucasian. He has been at MM Elementary School for seven years since kindergarten. David likes to play chess, read non-fiction and fantasy books and play the card game of Magic: The Gathering. He also enjoys playing video games on his computer and Xbox 360. His two favorite video games are Star Wars and Lord of the Rings. David enjoys camping outdoors and is a member of the National Archery in Schools Program (NASP) at MM Elementary School. David has been part of the gifted and talented program at MM Elementary School for the past six years and lives with his mother, father, and brother. His brother is a fourth grader at MM Elementary School.

**Amanda** is twelve years old and she is Caucasian. She has been at MM Elementary School for one year. Prior to MM Elementary School, Amanda has attended four other schools. In her spare time, she likes to draw pictures of animals and play the piano. She also enjoys keeping up with her friends on Facebook. In terms of being physically active, Amanda likes to dance and play soccer. She lives with her mother, stepfather, and twin siblings. Her siblings attend MM Elementary School and they are in the fifth grade.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the interviews, which were conducted with each participant one time, were completed it was time to transcribe the interviews and analyze the data obtained through the interview process. As field notes played an integral part of the data collection, they were used in coding the data to determine emergent themes. According to Emerson (1995), field notes are descriptive and reflective data gathering accounts that describe the environment, participants, mannerisms, and maps of a particular study in an intense and involved manner.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), coding is the process of fragmenting data into conceptual components. To begin the coding process I referred back to my field notes that contained the data that was collected and looked for similar comments that were provided by the interview participants. From this point, I sorted these comments into piles which created themes and applied the concept of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

From the grounded theory approach five themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Responsive Classroom establishes a warm classroom community; (2) Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork; (3) Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice; (4) Responsive Classroom provides accountability for actions through logical consequences; and (5) Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter focuses on the findings of the research that emerged during the data collection process. It was through the use of in-depth interviews that allowed the emergence of five themes related to Responsive Classroom. These themes were: (1) Responsive Classroom establishes a warm classroom community; (2) Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork; (3) Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice; (4) Responsive Classroom provides accountability for actions through logical consequences; and (5) Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom.

### **“It’s like we’re one big happy family:” Establishing a warm classroom community**

The first theme that emerged once the interviews were completed and the data was collected was that students feel safe in their respective classroom. It is important for students to feel this way because it allows them to focus more on the social and academic aspects of school. As Taneesha expressed:

*I really like how we’re all in a circle and we go around and shake each other’s hand and say good morning. I also like to hear what everyone did that night before or over their weekend. You find out lots about people that you would never know. It’s like we’re one big happy family. My first year here I got to know so many people and some of them I have class with now.*

Not only does Responsive Classroom create a warm classroom community for those students who have experienced this educational approach for years but it also plays a significant factor for students who are unfamiliar with this approach. To expand upon this thought, Amanda explained:



*When I first came here from a different school I was new and didn't know no one.*

*Morning Meeting really helped me get a lot of friends because it is about interacting with other people like shaking their hands and sharing things about yourself. At the beginning of the year I got called names and problems got solved because of my friends. If class was boring I wouldn't have that many friends but because I get to hang out with my friends in the classroom I like it a lot.*

In addition to taking into account the social aspect of learning, Responsive Classroom also focuses on the emotional and academic aspect of education and how students receive these important needs as well. As David highlighted, *"I never feel uncomfortable when I answer a question wrong or say something that doesn't make sense. It just gives me confidence to try again next time."* Similarly, Quyntel feels the same way about not being made fun of and laughed at because of the warm classroom community that currently exists for him. Quyntel stated:

*Man, at my old school I got messed with all the time and it really bothered me. It got so bad that I used to start fights with those people who be makin' fun of me like that. It was crazy and my ma got tired of it and I got tired of it too. I got to the point where I wasn't feelin' like goin' to school, know what I mean.*

Not only is the classroom community positive from a student to student perspective but it is also "warm" from a student to teacher perspective. As Xiong explained, *"I know that she is the teacher but sometimes it doesn't seem like she is because she really shows us that she cares about us in an individual way."*

As clearly indicated during the interviews, Responsive Classroom is very important to these students and it allows them to feel more confident and comfortable in regards to their

social, emotional and academic needs. Students at MM Elementary School learn the principles and practices of Responsive Classroom indirectly through teacher and peer-modeling.

**“Together we can make it happen:” Positive interaction through teamwork**

The second theme that was identified based on the interview responses focused on how Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork. In regards to teamwork, some participants described some illustrations of teamwork that are currently taking place within their classroom. As BauPha indicated:

*Right now we are doing this thing called Steps to Success. Our class needs to spell out the words: Be Safe, Be a Learner, Be Respectful and if we are the first class to earn all the letters then we get a pizza party. Our class has to work as a team to get this done which means we can't be loud in the hallways. Together we can make it happen. So far we have the “n” for Learner.*

Not only does teamwork take place throughout the school day but it occurs during morning meeting time as well, specifically during the planned activity portion of Responsive Classroom. As expressed by David:

*When we get to play Silent Ball the goal is for the whole class to be quiet and throw the ball right at the person and not all crazy-like. If we get loud and out of control we have to quit and start Math early. We haven't been able to do it lately because we've been too loud and too many people are wild.*

Even during exhibit times of Forces of Nature and Simple Machines, in which much emphasis is placed on staying on task during these times, teamwork is important. As Taneesha highlighted, *“If we don't work hard as an entire grade, we have to quit and go back to the classroom.”*

Teamwork is an important part of Responsive Classroom and it is beneficial to the students who were interviewed as this is the realization in which most of them own. In practicing the skill of teamwork at a relatively young age, these students will be more successful as their academic years continue on and they proceed into adulthood.

**“Sometimes I get to work on whatever I want to:” Teaching responsibility through academic choice**

Another theme that emerged from the data was that students feel that they are learning how to be more responsible in the classroom when granted the opportunity. It is during certain unstructured times to the school day when the teacher will announce to the students that they are able to choose what it is they want to work on. By allowing students to choose what they work on such as math, reading, and spelling; students experience deeper engagement within the learning process. In addition to deeper engagement, academic choice allows students to view themselves directly as capable learners. As Quynzel stated:

*For real, there are sometimes when I don't feel like doin' math or readin' or anything and when this happens I be gettin' frustrated and start trippin' a little bit. Sometimes I get to work on whatever I want to. When I get to decide what to work on I do my spellin' packet. Spellin' is my favorite thing to do so when we are able to choose I always do that.*

In regards to Responsive Classroom teaching students about responsibility through academic choice Amanda provided similar comments. She acknowledged:

*It is teaching me how to be more responsible with my homework. At the other schools I went to we didn't have this and I was horrible in getting my homework done on time and I always had to stay in for recess while my other friends got to go have fun. Next year I*

*will be in middle school and things will be harder so I have to be better at getting my homework done so Responsive Classroom is preparing me for next year.*

In focusing on Responsibility, Responsive Classroom also lends itself to motivating students and affording them the opportunity to achieve very high levels of academic and personal success. As expressed by BauPha, *“Sometimes I get bored in class and don’t feel like doing anything but when I am able to choose what I want to work on it makes school more fun.”*

The interview participants were in agreement that Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice. Each participant also indicated that they enjoy their school day more if they are able to choose what it is they work on.

**“If we do stuff wrong and we aren’t safe, we must suffer the consequences:” Providing accountability for actions through logical consequences**

One of the classroom practices that are contained within Responsive Classroom is logical consequences. Logical consequences are used to help students regain control, make amends, and get back on track when they are not being safe to themselves or others around them. Three kinds of logical consequences exist: You Break It, You Fix It, Loss of Privileges, and Take a Break. In terms of You Break It, You Fix It, children are responsible for fixing the mess, material, or even the friendship that was broken. In mending relationships, children will be asked to do a “friendship fix it” in which they do something kind to make them feel like friends again as opposed to a simple apology. Loss of privileges result when children misuse materials or work areas and until they are ready to make better decisions, materials and/or privileges may be taken away. Take a Break consequences occur when children are beginning to lose control. At this time, children may be asked to remove themselves from the group until they are able to regain their self-control and are ready to rejoin the class and participate in a more positive manner.

David was the first participant to express his thoughts regarding Responsive Classroom teaching accountability for actions through logical consequences. As David explained in frustration, *“I don’t get why people who act badly still get to be in school. They shouldn’t be given so many chances.”* Xiong shared in frustration a situation he took part in that demonstrated the classroom practice of teaching accountability for actions through logical consequences. Xiong stated:

*It was like the third week we came back after Christmas vacation was over and me and my buddies were minding our own business when a table of fourth graders sitting next to us started calling us Hmong and making fun of the way our eyes are shaped. So then we started calling them names back and we were ready to fight. I was so mad at them and I wanted to punch them. Instead, I went to the condiment table, got the Ranch dressing bottle, and squirted it all over those dudes. The lunch supervisor sent me to the CARES room and as a consequence I had to sweep the entire cafeteria, clean all the tables, and wash all of the walls. I hated it!*

Similarly, Taneesha understands the extent of logical consequences and how they are incorporated within the classroom as well as extensions of the classroom. As Taneesha explained, *“I always have to take a break because I talk a lot in class and in the hallway and the teacher gets frustrated when I do this so she sends me out to take a break.”* Likewise, Quyntel affirmed:

*If we do stuff wrong and we aren’t safe, we must suffer the consequences. On Monday we were outside playin’ basketball for recess and I went up for a shot and got pushed and landed on my elbow and it got all bloody. I got up and started runnin’ after him. When I caught him I tackled him and threw him to the ground. Then I started hittin’ him in the*

*face. I had to be pulled off him. We were both sent to the CARES room and I was suspended and now me and him can't play no sports the rest of the year outside at recess.*

Through the use of logical consequences, Responsive Classroom allows students the opportunity to take accountability for their actions while learning from them in a positive way.

**“I feel that I am getting a better education:” Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom**

The last theme that emerged from the data in this study was a clear indication that a greater education is being received because of Responsive Classroom. More specifically, it is through the social, emotional, and academic importance of Responsive Classroom's principles and classroom practices that allow for students to feel this way regarding their individual education. As David duly noted:

*When I go to college and eventually get a job I will have to work with all kinds of different people. These people will be some that I like and some that I hate. The Responsive Classroom lets us do so many things in the classroom like try new things out on our own and it helps me not worry about failing at stuff.*

When asked during the interview if she felt as though she was receiving a better education because of Responsive Classroom BauPha declared:

*Yes, I feel that I am getting a better education because I get to choose what I want to do and make my own decisions without the teacher doing it for me. When I get older, making decisions on my own will be all the time so I am learning this now.*

It was clear during the interviews that the participants had different perspectives as to how they are receiving a better education. Some participants explained that a better education is received because Responsive Classroom allows students to work together as exemplified by

Taneesha's thoughts. She stated, *"If our whole class read the most minutes out of the other classes we earned a pizza party. That was our goal and we did it!"* Xiong had a different perspective as to how he is receiving a greater education because of Responsive Classroom.

Xiong expressed:

*I think it gives me more confidence. When I was in kindergarten I was really shy and didn't talk a lot. Over the years I have gotten more comfortable with working with people who have different interests than me and when it comes time to do presentations and stuff I'm not really nervous no more.*

When asked about her thoughts regarding receiving a greater education because of Responsive Classroom Taneesha clarified:

*I know I'm getting a better education because the teacher gives me a sense of direction that helps me succeed in my classroom. When I was in Chicago my schools never did this. I am also learning good teamwork and how to get along with other people who are different than me.*

It was interesting to hear Quyntel's perspective in regards to whether or not he is receiving a greater education because of Responsive Classroom. As Quyntel explained to me during his interview with a smile on his face:

*It seems weird but I view my teacher as a role model for us as students. She is kinda like Kobe Bryant on the Lakers know what I mean. The way she does things is so calm and when she has to get mad she doesn't get really mad. The way she does things is good for me because I be gettin' mad real easy and sometimes I need to just chill like she does.*

Perhaps out of all the interviews that were conducted, Amanda's response to the question of whether or not she is receiving a greater education because of Responsive Classroom was the most influential on her behalf. Amanda expressed her thoughts in this regard:

*I don't know if I am getting a better education because of it but I know that I am learning more about myself and what I am capable of doing and how I feel about certain things that happen to me. The way I feel about things since school has started has changed a lot. I really like who I am and I like being here.*

It is through the principles and classroom practices of morning meeting, rule creation, interactive modeling, positive teacher language, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, working with families, and collaborative problem solving that these students feel they are receiving a greater education because of Responsive Classroom.

Responsive Classroom is an educational approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe classroom community. The overall responses that were obtained through the interview process were that Responsive Classroom is a positive approach to education and that the students who were interviewed really enjoy being a part of this approach. This study explored five themes that supported this thought. These themes were: (1) Responsive Classroom establishes a warm classroom community; (2) Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork; (3) Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice; (4) Responsive Classroom provides accountability for actions through logical consequences; and (5) Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom. Data indicated that students were able to articulate the importance of working with other students who are different than they are.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The importance in which Responsive Classroom plays regarding the social, emotional, and academic needs of children was clearly indicated throughout the research obtained. The participants in this research study were 6 sixth-grade students who provided their personal perceptions into the Responsive Classroom approach to elementary teaching. The underlying thought about Responsive Classroom based on this population of students was that Responsive Classroom is a positive educational approach for them.

After the interview process was complete and the data was analyzed, one conclusion in particular caught my immediate attention. The first conclusion that I came to was how each participant was able to fully articulate the importance of working with other people who are different from them. I found this to be very surprising considering the ages of the participants; 11 and 12 years old, respectively. It is very powerful testimony to the Responsive Classroom approach that these students already understand the importance of working with people who have different backgrounds and different interests than their own. If these students who were interviewed have this knowledge and understanding now it will only prove more beneficial to them in the future as they enter middle school, high school, college, and into the “real world.”

Another conclusion that emerged was from the data collected. After each participant’s background information had been fully documented the first question that was asked to each participant was, “Do you know what Responsive Classroom is?” The general consensus for this question amongst all of the participants was the answer “No.” None of the participants had even heard of the word let alone what this word meant. In fact, it wasn’t until an explanation and description of Responsive Classroom was provided to them that some of the participants indicated that they did indeed know what this approach to elementary teaching was. Even after

explaining in detail what Responsive Classroom was, some participants still seemed a little “cloudy” regarding some of the components to this approach to education.

It seems interesting that these students take part in these classroom practices of Responsive Classroom every school day and yet do not possess the knowledge of what it is they’re doing or being asked to do. With this the case, one recommendation would be for teachers to spend more time explaining what each classroom principle (the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum; how children learn is as important as what they learn; the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction; there is a specific set of social skills that children need in order to be successful academically and socially; knowing the children we teach individually, culturally, and developmentally is as important as knowing the content we teach; knowing the parents of the children we teach is important to knowing the children; how the adults at school work together to accomplish their mission is as important as individual competence) is and the significance of each principle and how it relates to students’ educational framework.

In addition, teachers should spend more time explaining and modeling classroom practices of Responsive Classroom (morning meetings, rule creation, interactive modeling, positive teacher language, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, working with families, and collaborative problem solving) so that students are comfortable with all aspects of the Responsive Classroom approach from a social, emotional, and academic perspective and to also know what it is they’re doing or being asked to do. By communicating and modeling these principles and practices of Responsive Classroom throughout the entire school year repetition will be created and once repetition of these principles and practices is established and maintained, students will be able to fully understand the

Responsive Classroom approach to elementary teaching which will allow students to be more motivated and engaged during times of learning.

It was indicated through the data that students feel more responsible when they are able to choose what it is they work on in the classroom. By allowing for this to occur it provides more ownership for the students in regards to their schoolwork. In addition to ownership of schoolwork, the classroom practice of academic choice through Responsive Classroom allows for students to be more engaged and motivated during the learning process. Keeping this in mind, one recommendation as it pertains to academic choice and responsibility related to it is to allow students more academic choice time as opposed to rigid, structured times in which motivation and engagement is, at times, limited and irresponsible behavior may be increased. This recommendation may or may not be applicable considering the amount of curriculum that consumes a school day. However, it is worth examining this possibility and determining whether or not more student motivation, higher levels of engagement and increased responsibility materialize within the classroom community.

Another conclusion that was derived from the data was that there should be a more concrete way of handling discipline in which parameters should be included. One participant indicated his frustration as he has witnessed through first-hand accounts in which students are granted too many opportunities to stay in school after they have already exhibited problematic behaviors of a severe nature. Based on personal observations as an employee of MM Elementary School, I have also witnessed students being allowed numerous “take-a-break” opportunities throughout the school day instead of placing the continuous misbehavior to the next level. For example, if a student is constantly disrupting class they should be afforded the opportunity to leave the classroom and take a break through a logical consequences point of view. However,

when this student returns and is sent out time and time again and the “take-a-break” is not conducive for this student, then he or she should be sent to the CARES room which is a room designated for students who are displaying constant problematic behaviors. At this time, these students who are displaying problematic behaviors should attempt to regain self-control there.

To combat this problem of misbehavior and continuous disruption during class time, a proposed recommendation is to integrate baseball’s “3-strikes and you’re out!” method. If a student has to take more than three “take-a-breaks” throughout the school day, they should be sent to the CARES room and dealt with accordingly by the behavioral teacher opposed to the teacher from which they came from. It is also imperative that teachers do their part to maintain a warm classroom community at all times which is the core component of Responsive Classroom. With this said, I have witnessed situations where teachers create a “power struggle” between them and students in the classroom. In a case such as this, a student leaves the CARES room in a calm manner and anticipates joining the class again. As the student opens the door they are immediately confronted by the teacher in a negative way with the teacher stating, “Are you going to act right?” Instead of this situation taking place, teachers should embrace the fact that this student has made a better choice and is eager to learn and participate once again.

Furthermore, there should be a difference in consequences for behaviors. To elaborate, if a student talks persistently during class and a student punches another student, becomes defiant towards staff or acts disrespectful to students and/or staff; then these are distinctly different actions and should be handled differently as well. It has been witnessed where the same “take-a-break” consequence was deemed appropriate for the constant talking in class and the punching of another student. In this case, for example, it was justifiable for the student who talked a lot to “take-a-break.” However, the student who punched another student should have been “written-

up” by means of a referral form, sent to the CARES room and suspended from school. Once again, it has been witnessed where teachers have used different approaches for these similar examples previously mentioned. At MM Elementary School, logical consequences should be based on the action that took place as opposed to the discretion of the teacher involved. This should be a universal concept of thought and implementation throughout the entire school.

The last conclusion that was determined and the one that may be the most important in terms of the social and emotional needs of students was that the participants really like being part of a classroom community. It is during this time that they feel important as well as safe. It is also a time for students to get to know one another on a personal level which helps them function better throughout the school day because of the connectedness amongst peers. If problems arise within the classroom, the teacher is available to assist with the problem as well as the availability of peer friendships to help with problems as well. In having a warm classroom community students are able to be themselves and not worry about ridicule or threats of verbal and/or physical abuse. In allowing students to feel safe and have their social and emotional needs addressed and realized, it is recommended that all schools incorporate the Responsive Classroom approach. Not only is it conducive from a classroom management standpoint but it is also a great educational approach that focuses on the learning and welfare of the child simultaneously.

With students from an urban population being the main population of focus for this study it is concluded that the Responsive Classroom approach is a very suitable model of classroom management as well as an approach to academic learning. This was evidenced by the population of students that were interviewed and the perceptions that were communicated to me through their responses. In addition, based on my findings, diversity does not play a factor in the overall student perception of Responsive Classroom. Once again, this thought was supported by the data

that was gathered in which, for the most part, each participant spoke in high regard to this educational approach to elementary teaching.

For the most part, all of the conclusions drawn from the findings of the interviews were positive about Responsive Classroom. The participants really enjoy this approach and seem to do well with the use of it from a social, emotional, and academic perspective. Not only is the Responsive Classroom approach teaching them important concepts within the classroom but it is also teaching them important life skills at the same time such as teamwork, responsibility, and accountability for actions. Without the use of Responsive Classroom, students within this urban population may not have been afforded the opportunities to learn these fundamental principles and practices of life and have their social, emotional, and academic needs addressed in such a superior fashion.

## **Chapter Six: Self-Reflection**

I like research just as much as I like peas, not at all. However, just as peas have their place in the world so too does research. The entire process that was necessary to complete my action research project was very overwhelming for me. There were so many times when I just wanted to “explode” because the stress of this project was really affecting my way of life in a negative manner. In the next couple of pages I will provide an honest account of my thoughts regarding the research process and steps that were taken to complete my action research project.

It seemed as though once I really began the research process is when the additional stress started to filter throughout my life. I became very irritable as I let this project consume me and my way of living. There were times when I became very distant or withdrawn from my family, friends, and even co-workers. More often than not, I consider myself to be an easygoing person. However, once this project became my main focus I changed my whole outlook on many things within my life. There were times when I wanted to give up because too many personal things were coinciding with this project and I found myself at times, experiencing difficulties finding an appropriate balance of life and research.

With this said, out of all the chapters that were completed the hardest chapter for me was chapter two, the Literature Review. This was difficult for me because it demanded so much time in the library and during these times I had to leave my family behind. Once resources were found, the next step was to sift through the resources and determine if any of them were applicable to the research study being examined. Once all of the resources were obtained, the research had to be documented properly while maintaining a high level of readability. It seems easy enough but it was without question one of the most difficult pieces of writing that I have ever experienced.

Without question, the Findings chapter was the most fun to write. I found the entire process to be rather enjoyable. From the in-depth interviews came the transcribing. From that point, came the determination of themes and then from that point, it was time to document them. I really appreciated this process and how each one of these steps came together to create the Findings chapter. When this chapter was completed I was pleased as to how it went and how successful this part of the process had been for me.

As mentioned earlier, this research process was very difficult for me. Not only has this experience of writing a thesis made me a better researcher but respecting the process has made me a better person. Once I have my master's degree in my possession I'm sure I will find myself in a reflective state of mind and I will ask myself which was greater—the master's degree or the journey in which it took to get the master's degree? Perhaps these two thoughts go hand in hand but now that one of them is over I look forward to the other one as I look forward to obtaining my master's degree.

The interview process has allowed me to obtain a better understanding of the students that I work with every school day. Prior to the interviews, I assumed that most of the students didn't appreciate what the Responsive Classroom approach has to offer. However, during the interviews my preconception of this thought changed. Students really do care about feeling safe and learning and having their needs addressed and realized. This was very important for me to realize because as I achieve my own classroom one day I will be implementing these same principles and classroom practices. Also, now that I know the importance it serves to the students, I will teach each one accordingly so that responsive classroom management is achieved and the best possible learning environment is attained for the students at hand.



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# **Student Perceptions of Responsive Classroom in an Urban Setting**

**Jeremy Lee Jones**

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## ABSTRACT

### Student Perceptions of Responsive Classroom in an Urban Setting

Jeremy Lee Jones

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Action Research Final Project

Responsive Classroom is an approach to elementary teaching that focuses on the social, emotional, and academic needs of children by creating a warm classroom environment. Responsive Classroom incorporates ten classroom practices into its educational framework. These classroom practices consist of: morning meeting, rule creation, interactive modeling, positive teacher language, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, working with families, and collaborative problem solving. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this study seeks to explore student perceptions of Responsive Classroom based on a specific population of urban students. Themes that emerged from the interviews were: (1) Responsive Classroom establishes a warm classroom community; (2) Responsive Classroom promotes positive interaction through teamwork; (3) Responsive Classroom teaches responsibility through academic choice; (4) Responsive Classroom provides accountability for actions through logical consequences; and (5) Greater education is received through the use of principles and classroom practices of Responsive Classroom.



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